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How a nursing home in France stopped coronavirus from killing elderly in its care

There were 4 deaths at Vilanova during lockdown but none appears to be linked to COVID-19

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Nurses hug as they leave the Vilanova nursing home in Corbas, near Lyon, central France, on Monday. For 47 days and nights, staff and residents waited out the coronavirus storm together, while the illness killed tens of thousands of people in other homes across Europe, including more than 9,000 in France. (Laurent Cipriani/The Associated Press)

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As the coronavirus scythed through nursing homes, cutting a deadly path, Valerie Martin vowed to herself that the story would be different in the home she runs in France.

The action she took to stop the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, from infecting and killing the vulnerable older adults in her care was both drastic and effective: Martin and her staff locked themselves in with the 106 residents.

For 47 days and nights, staff and residents of the Vilanova nursing home on the outskirts of the east central city of Lyon waited out the coronavirus storm together, while COVID-19 killed tens of thousands of people in other homes across Europe, including more than 9,000 in France.

"I said, 'No, not mine. My residents still have so much to live for,'" Martin said in an interview. "I don't want this virus to kill them when they have been through so much."

On Monday, Martin and 12 colleagues, who stayed in the home for the full duration, ended their quarantine with hugs of celebration and singing, and with an uplifting victory: COVID-19 tests conducted on the residents and staff all came back negative. The caregivers, who nicknamed themselves "the happily confined," left in a convoy of cars, joyously honking horns and heading for reunions with families, pets and homes.

“We succeeded. Every day, every hour, was a win.”

- Valerie Martin

"We succeeded," Martin said. "Every day, every hour, was a win."

While COVID-19 killed people by the dozens at some other homes, Martin said there were just four deaths at Vilanova during their lockdown and that none appears to have been linked to the virus. The average age of residents at the home is 87, and the deaths were not unexpected, she said.

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In this photo provided by the Vilanova nursing home, residents show posters reading, 'Thank you for everything' on April 27 in Corbas, central France. The nursing staff of the care home decided 45 days ago that rather than lock residents in their rooms as the government urged, the staff would lock themselves in the home with residents. The home has had zero virus cases so far. (Valerie Martin/The Associated Press)

'A fantastic team'

Because staff and residents were locked in together, Vilanova didn't have to confine people to their rooms like other homes to shield them from the risk of infection brought in from outside. That spared residents the loneliness that has been agonizing for others. Vilanova allowed residents to continue to mingle and to get fresh air outside.

“It saved lives. Perfect, perfect. I tip my hat to them.”

- Gilles Barret, son of 95-year-old resident

The son of a 95-year-old resident described the staff as "a fantastic team," saying they saved his mother by shielding her from the virus and keeping her spirits up, even holding celebrations for her birthday on April 17. Gilles Barret said the home's daily Facebook posts of news, photos and videos also were "such a comfort."

"It saved lives," he said. "Perfect, perfect. I tip my hat to them."

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'I consider them almost, like, as a second family,' said Makhena Katerie Rankin Guérin. 'That bond, it's so valuable to me.' 7:26

Martin said she didn't want their residents to feel like "prisoners" and that it wouldn't have felt right to her had she continued to come and go from the home while depriving them of their liberty during France's lockdown, in place since March 17.

Residents were confined to their rooms for two days at the beginning while staffers gave the home a thorough cleaning, and that proved "a catastrophe," Martin said.

"In two days, we already saw people who started no longer wanting to eat, people who didn't want to get up, people who said, 'Why are you washing me? It's pointless,'" she said.

In this photo provided by the Vilanova nursing home, a nurse works with residents inside the facility on April 22. (Valerie Martin/The Associated Press)

Always together

In all, 29 of the 50 staff volunteered to stay, bringing pillows, sleeping bags and clothes on March 18 for what they initially thought might be a three-week stay but which they subsequently opted to extend. Other staff came from outside to help and were kept apart from residents and made to wear masks and take other protective measures to prevent infections.

The caregivers slept on mattresses on the floor. Martin slept in her office. One of the volunteers left a 10-month-old baby at home. The team tallied the days on a blackboard

marked: "Always together with heart."

"It was tough," said caregiver Vanessa Robert. But there were also moments of "total joy, getting together in the evenings, fooling around, tossing water bombs at each other."

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Martin said her top priority now is to console her estranged cat, Fanta. And one of the weirdest moments of the lockdown was climbing back into her car and hearing the same tune on the CD player — Limp Bizkit's *Mission Impossible* soundtrack — that she had been listening to when she parked seven weeks earlier.

"It was a bit like entering a holiday camp," she said. "Living a lockdown with 130 people is extremely rewarding."

Nurses leave the Vilanova nursing home on Monday after spending 47 days and nights with the 106 residents to stop the spread of COVID-19. (Laurent Cipriani/The Associated Press)

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